

## **For He Is Our Peace**

Michael Fitzpatrick

You know, I can relate to King David. I think God has problems that need solving and I'm the solution to his problems. God needs me more than I need God. Likewise, David wants to help God out. He thinks to himself, *Here I am in this nice house, I've got air conditioning, a pellet stove, an infinity pool, four-car garage. And what does God have? A mobile home trailer! Not even a double-wide! God's getting hauled around and doesn't even have a nice place to just be. Maybe I can hook God up with a house that's even better than mine!*

See, God was present with the covenant people through the place of the tabernacle and the vessel of the ark, which held on top of it not a graven image of God—that was forbidden—but a seat, reserved for Yahweh alone. Neither the tent nor the ark were shabby of course. The creation of both took almost all the wealth David's ancestors had to make. But still, they were by nature impermanent. God may have had the nicest mobile home money could buy, but it was nothing compared to the house of a King.

So David tells the local prophet Nathan that he's going to build God a proper house. And that very night God tells Nathan, "Oh no he isn't. I'm God. I will build David a house, and only then will I make it possible for his household to build me a house out of the gifts I have given them."

- Notice that God first says that the tabernacle has been on the move for a long time, and he never once instructed any of the leaders of Israel to build a house for the Lord. That's because God doesn't need a house. It was Israel that needed a house; that's why they were led to the promised land!

- So God immediately changes the conversation, and starts talking about how God meets the needs of David and his people, not the other way

around. God anointed David, God protected David from his enemies, God made David a successful monarch. It was God who gave the people of Israel their own place, and gave them leaders.

- Then God says, “I’m going to give you a house, and offspring, and only after you’re gone will I permit them to build me a house, just so that you know who serves who here. I establish your throne. You don’t establish mine.”

-A couple remarkable lessons emerge from this humbling exchange. The first is it dissolves a silly dichotomy we modern people tend to have between politics and theology. Suppose I asked you whether this passage was about politics or theology? I grew up in a church tradition that would have said it was all theology, about what God was up to. But today, with our more social justice minded culture, many would say this is a political passage, showing what God wants for people. Guess what? It’s *both!*

- Let’s look at the politics first. We actually find a vision of the just society right here in these words.

- The just society is one where every community has a place to call their own, land to which they belong.

- The just society is one that is not disturbed by foreign invaders trying to subjugate them.

- The just society is one that is able to rest, no longer riven by strife or fearful of impending war.

- The problem with taking these images as a purely political vision is that it engenders the mistaken thought that this is merely what God wants but it’s up to us to make it happen. That was David’s mistake. He thought he knew what God wanted and then he was going to go about making it happen. Here’s where the theology comes in. This *is* a passage about a political vision *and* it’s a passage about God’s divine action in the world bringing that vision into reality. God is the one who brought

forth these political goods for the covenant people.

- If we lose the theology, we mistakenly try to fix the world on our own. If we lose the politics, we miss the divine action of God in the world transforming our reality towards true justice.

- Our role as the church, as the very Body of Christ for this world here now, is to share this message with a world desperately needing God's justice. Our job is to immerse ourselves in the scriptures and liturgies of God so that we can see the Spirit of God brooding over the waters, birthing new things, work that we join in and share with others.

I want to share with you what happens when we miss God at work. I have a friend who posted a public message this past week in the wake of all the political turbulence. It was a long post that began, "I'm so sad and so scared. I am terrified." She went on to describe all the political events that made her feel this way. I'm not going to share that part of her post because I suspect that every one of us can easily fill in our own anxieties in her stead. In the wake of the first attempted assassination of a current or former U. S. President in over 40 years, it can feel like we built our house on sinking sand.

But what I do want to share with you is her final three sentences. After writing a long post that was focused on the details of elections and polls and media reports, she closed with this remarkable comment:

I am praying, but I don't really believe God is going to do anything about it. I don't think God decides who wins elections. God never overrides people's free will.

Reading her post nearly broke my heart. Faced with political anxiety, she does not see God taking care of her or her community. Theology and politics go together. The theology she has learned led her to despair. She did not hear God saying to her, as David testifies in our Psalm for today,

“My faithfulness and love shall be with you, and you shall be victorious through my Name.” Indeed, much of her post seemed to me to be saying, “We’d better do something about our politics, because God is not going to save us.”

- David calls God “the rock of my salvation.” That can’t just mean feel good vibes about how God welcomes everyone or something. It means that when we feel threatened on all sides, God is the rock upon which we stand to face the terrors of the world. If the Good News of Jesus means anything, it’s that the victory of the risen Jesus is enough to overcome the tribulations of our present.

- My friend wrote that God can’t help because God never overrides people’s free will. Well, I don’t know about you, but it sure seems to me that when David said he was going to help God out with some prime real estate, God had no problems overriding David’s free will! Maybe we put too much stock in our free will, in what we can accomplish. Maybe the real hope of salvation is to trust in ourselves and our free will *less*, and to trust more in the God who raises the dead.

- In the verse that immediately precedes our epistle reading today, that’s almost exactly what St. Paul says. I’ll read it for you: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” So are we to do good and promote justice in the world? Absolutely! But it’s not as if Jesus just came to show us a good example of how to be nice to each other. No, we are God’s handiwork, and it is God who has prepared the good things we are sent to do, just like it was God who made Israel a people, gave them a land, and built David’s house.

- St. Paul continues this idea in our epistle reading. He writes to the church in Ephesus that they were at one time illegal immigrants, strangers, outsiders, to the covenant promise. They were a people without God, and without hope. “But now,” St. Paul says, “in Christ

Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

- And in case you think this isn't political, the next verse says, “For he is our peace.” Well, you can't talk about being a people without so much as a green card who have been brought near into the peace of Christ and not be political! Look what he goes on to say that God is doing. God has abolished the walls of hostility that separate identity groups, crafting one humanity where there before had been two. That's as political as it gets.

- What does this transformation of our very humanity mean? It means that where we were once strangers and illegal immigrants, now we are citizens with the saints and family members in the household of God, a house that is not even the one King David's son Solomon built; no, this is the house built by the blood of Jesus, that has Christ Jesus as the cornerstone in the foundation. Are we talking about spiritual realities? Absolutely. But we're also talking about political realities.

- You see, these transformations make it possible for us to do something that no other community on earth can do. We can love and serve our neighbor without having to fight for our own rights and recognition. We've already been given our rights and recognition. We're citizens in the kingdom of heaven, children living in the house of God! We don't need anything more. And that leaves us free to go out and serve those who are not yet citizens and children, those who are still far away. We get to go out and tell others the Good News that the kingdom of God is for them, the house of God is for them!

- And why is that Good News, for them or for us? Why is the Good News ... good news?

- Well, because if we're citizens in God's kingdom, then our hope is no longer tied to the fate of earthly leaders, to the outcomes of elections or court rulings or wars. It's not that those things don't matter, it's that

however much they matter our future is the same—we are unshakenly rooted in the rock of our salvation. We trust in the God who is the Judge of all the earth, who day by day is moving the fate of all peoples towards reckoning, reparation, restoration, and redemption. God’s love will have the last word, whatever other words are said along the way.

- Nor does this hope make us apathetic or indifferent. Quite the contrary, it is by the hope of Christ that we are politically engaged, by which we love and serve our neighbors, by which we advocate for justice and challenge the powers of this world. We no longer have to advocate for ourselves, and that leaves us free to advocate for others. *That* is the Good News of our epistle reading this morning.

-I want to end by emphasizing once more that we must not think any of this is something we have accomplished. We are God’s handiwork, not the other way around. Over and over in our epistle St. Paul emphasizes how this transformation of our humanity was achieved. “You have been brought near by the blood of Christ”; “in his flesh he has made both groups into one”; “he has reconciled both groups to God in one body through the cross.” This is the language of atonement, of God at work in Christ reconciling the world to divine forgiveness, and reconciling us to each other. The political revolution of the cross is what we celebrate when we come together here at the altar rail to eat of Christ’s Body and drink the chalice of his Blood. This was God’s action in Jesus of Nazareth on that old rugged cross, and yet mysteriously that is the same action which happens on this alter table to my right. It is a sacrifice of love that was made for you, and you, and you, and even me. It is for all. It is for everyone in this sanctuary, and everyone beyond its walls. It is God building a house for us. It is God making peace for us. It is God breaking down the walls of hostility for us.

We don’t save God. God saves us. That’s good theology, and it’s good politics too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.